

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH AND CHANGE IN AKUAPEM

M.A. KWAMENA POH*

This paper concerns some effects of Basel Missionary influence upon aspects of marriage and family life among the South-eastern Akan since 1835. The year 1835 saw the arrival of the first Basel missionary, the Danish born Andreas Riis (1804-54), at Akropong. The Basel Mission Society founded in 1815 in Switzerland was the first active mission to begin work among a truly indigenous people, as yet largely unaffected by the influence of Europeans on the Gold Coast. There had been attempts at evangelisation on the coast by such bodies as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), - whose great African Missionary had been Philip Quaque (1765-1816), - the Moravian Brethren and the Danish-Halle Society in the Eighteenth century. The activities of these bodies, however, were mainly concerned with the education of the mulatto children at Cape Coast and Osu, and such attempts at evangelisation as they had made scarcely went beyond the confines of the forts. (Reindorf, 1950:213-17; Smith, 1966: 1928).

Riis was warmly received by the Akuapemhene, Addo Dankwa, the Paramount Chief of Akuapem, who allowed him to open a mission station at Akropong. He bought a piece of land and with the help of the chiefs and people of Akuapem, he built a house for himself. In 1836, Riis reported to the Home Committee of the Society in Basel that he had got a house in Akropong ready for more missionaries. Significantly, Riis was nicknamed Osiadan (the house builder) by the people of Akropong, who were apparently impressed by the style of the house. However,

* Mr. Kwamena-Poh lectures in history in the Department of General and African Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi.

they were not impressed by the message he brought, for up to 1840 he had won no converts to Christianity. According to Akuapem tradition, Addo Dankwa is believed to have told Riis on his arrival that 'Christianity is the white man's religion and fetishism is the religion of the African; but if he can show him an African who practises the white man's religion, then he and his people will accept his mission'. During the period he travelled widely. He visited the rest of the Akuapem towns in 1835, then Krobo and Akwamu in 1838, Akyem and Kumasi in 1839. These visits, particularly the one to Kumasi, had been undertaken with a view to seeing if conditions there were better for a mission to begin. Unlike Thomas B. Freeman, the great Methodist missionary, who was able to open a mission station in Kumasi in 1840, Riis had come to the conclusion that more and clearer direction from God was needed before a mission to Asante could begin. Thus Riis decided upon Akropong in Akuapem as the place to begin the Basel Missionary work. He returned to Basel in July 1840. His report to the Home Committee had been a discouraging one; twelve years had lapsed since the beginning of the missionary work on the Gold Coast, and no converts had been made at Akropong after five years' work there, and in all eight missionaries had died. The first batch, consisting of four missionaries to the Gold Coast in 1828, died before the arrival of the second batch of three including Riis in 1832. Riis was the only survivor, and worked alone until 1837 when a third batch of three members arrived. Two died by the end of 1838; the third surviving member, Miss M.A. Wolter, became the wife of Riis. Despite his report, the new Director of the Mission, Wilhelm Hoffman, decided that the work started in the territory should continue. Riis was faithfully ready to go back. A new and realistic approach was now to be adopted. Akropong was to be settled by a group of second and third generation liberated Christian descendants of African slaves from the West Indies as the base and support of a renewed attempt on the Gold Coast. This experiment clearly justified itself, and the next phase of the Basel Missionary work rightly called the 'Second Attempt' began in 1843. (Smith, 1966: 35-44). When this phase

ended in 1850, a firm base had been established at Akropong. Riis' mission house was rebuilt, and by 1847 there were thirty-two stone houses in the Christian quarter at Akropong - a pattern which became a characteristic of all the Basel Missionary establishments in Akuapem and South-eastern Ghana. In September 1844 the first Twi school in the Gold Coast had been opened in Akropong, and in 1848 a Seminary for the training of African teachers and catechists was established.

Between 1850 and 1870 the endeavours of this little Christian community, comprising at the beginning of the period, European and West Indian missionaries and five African (including one West Indian) catechists-in-training, had resulted in the firm establishment of Christian mission stations in the main towns of Akuapem, Akyem, Akwamu, Ga and Krobo districts in south-eastern Ghana. It is in the first three, which are Akan, closely related to Akim and especially Akuapem, that we shall briefly examine the work of the Society, which had begun to make its influence strongly felt on the Akan traditional way of life. Our main concern here is its effects upon Akan marriage, the inheritance system and family life.

A brief historical account of the Akyem, Akuapem and Akwamu districts, which I have given elsewhere in some detail (Kwamena Poh, 1972), provides a necessary background to the understanding of the social impact of the work of the Basel Missionary Society. There are two distinct linguistic and ethnic groups in this south-eastern part of Ghana. They are the larger Akan-Twi speaking group, inhabiting Akyem, Akwamu and part of Akuapem districts; and the smaller Guan-speaking communities in the Akuapem hills. Up to 1730, the Akwamu had built and maintained the first Akan politico-military empire stretching from Asamankese (their first capital in present-day Akyem Abuakwa state) in the west across the Volta to the gates of Dahomey in the east.

Akyem formed the northwestern boundary of the Akwamu empire. Comprising Akyem Kotoku and

Akyem Abuakwa, they were emerging at the beginning of the eighteenth century as two powerful states and rivals of Akwamu for control of the European trade on the eastern coast of the Gold Coast. The Akwamu rule over the heterogeneous peoples of Akan in present-day Akyem Abuakwa, Guan in the Akuapem hills, Ga and Adangme in the Accra plains and Ewe in present-day Volta Region of Ghana lasted for about fifty years (1681-1730). In about 1730 emerged the Akuapem state, comprising the hitherto politically separate Guan communities and Akan (Akwamu and Akyem) settlers in the hills. Between 1729 and 1730 the Guan united with the Ga people, and assisted by others, particularly the Akyem, they declared a 'war of liberation' and overthrew the Akwamu state, to which they had been subjects for at least half a century. The Akwamu royal family escaped from its capital Nyanaoase near Nsawam and established a new capital at Akwamufie, on the other side of the Volta opposite the new township of Akosombo. The old Akwamu state west of the Volta fell largely to the Akyem Abuakwa. In addition a collateral branch of the ruling Akyem Abuakwa family established a new dynasty in the Akuapem hills; and the rulers set out to organise the predominantly Guan and the Akan settlers into a regular Akan order. In constitutional terms this is a system in which the offices of state are military as well as administrative, that is, certain civil offices are normally combined with particular military positions in time of war.

Both the Akwamu and Akyem rule in the Akuapem hills had important political and social effects. Firstly, during the Akwamu period there were the first few stools of the Akan type at Aburi and Larteh. Hitherto, and well until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Guan were ruled by priest-kings. This Akan political development, that is the adoption of black stools, continued and accelerated with the establishment of Akyem dynasty with its capital in the new town of Akropong. However, the Guan in adopting this did not apply the Akan system of inheritance. Their stools became occupied by successors belonging to the father's line, and not those belonging to the mother's line as the Akan do.

The second effect of the Akwamu and Akyem rule is that the southern Guan communities gradually abandoned their language, probably a Guan dialect and adopted the Twi language of the Akan. Yet they retained their Ohum or Eba annual festivals though some of the Guan towns celebrated the Odwira festival of the Akan as well. In many other cases, the Guan social organisation follows the same pattern as the Akan of south-eastern Ghana. The customary laws governing marriage and the practice of bigamy or polygamy, the procedure of divorce and puberty rites, which will be discussed below, are almost the same. Thus when the Basel missionaries began their attack on these social institutions they had a common enemy among the Akan and the Guan.

A brief chronology of their activities up to 1870 will show the opening up of mission stations among the south-eastern Akan at the following centres: Aburi (1847), Larteh (1853) Mamfe (1859) in the Akuapem hills; Kyebi, the capital of Akyem Abuakwa (1861), Gyadam (1861) Kukurantumi (1862) in Akyem Abuakwa, Anum (1864) in the Akwamu district. One permanent and striking feature of towns in south-eastern Akan, where the Basel Missionary Society established a station, is the existence of separate communities of the Christian quarter and the pagan quarter. Two reasons can be given for this development. In the first place, the early African Christians, certainly on the advice of the missionaries, left their pagan homes to build a new quarter away from the town, in order to become free from interference in their religious observances. Secondly, the separation of the new convert from the town and away from his ancestral home had not been without pressure. Not only for the reason outlined above, but also because he became a social outcast among his people. There is no evidence for active persecution of Christians among the south-eastern Akan, however, in conversation with our grandparents, we are told that the early Christians were forced to leave their homes because they became subjected to all sorts of ridicule. There were, however, occasional attacks from the fetish priests. For instance, in 1845, the

missionary Widmann reported that fetish priests accused them that they "built stone houses, killed monkeys, went to fetish places, hence fetish angry, there would be no rain." But as Smith rightly said such attacks were sporadic, and as he comments "It seems reasonable also to the chiefs to allow the Christians to have their own separate suburb or Salem; was this not the normal practice in Akan society for 'stranger' groups" (1966: 99).

The emergence of the Christian quarter became real after 1950. At Akropong, however, the development started with the arrival of Riis in 1835, but it was not until the arrival of the West Indians in 1843 that rapid progress was made. At Larteh David Asante, the great African missionary, reported in 1867 that the town was "beginning to look like a Christian community, with twenty-six houses, some of them completed. The houses are bigger and the streets were regular than among the heathens" (Brokensha 1964).

No doubt this divorce from the ancestral home in those days entailed a change to better conditions of life - a good sanitary system in the homes and surroundings and was associated with acquisition of new knowledge and skills in the schools available in this quarter. It had however its adverse effect on the indigenous way of life. It led to disruption of tradition. As Smith writes:

"It was not until much later that the chiefs realised that as the Christian Salems became well-established, there was a tendency for Christians to feel that they had removed themselves from traditional jurisdiction and obligation However desirable in theory, the practice of separation effected a break in tribal unity; the Christian was joining another 'tribe', so to speak, and he felt free to a large extent from former obligation" (1966: 93).

This development of separate communities however did

not present insoluble problems. Today, these Salem suburbs have been absorbed as a result of gradual growth of towns and no clear line of demarcation can be seen. However, 'Church' lands are still defined and in the recent past Christians, who break serious Church laws, such as entering polygamous marriages, have been ostracised. In recent times the gap is so narrow that intercourse between Christians and their relatives in the non-Christian section is frequent. They take part together in funeral celebrations and annual festival of the oman or state. Moreover, contemporary converts to Christianity continue to live in their ancestral homes with their non-converted relatives.

Distressing to the local population however and disruptive of the traditional way of life was the direct assault by the missionaries upon polygyny. Polygyny was common among the rich men and the chiefs. In 1861, the Regulations for the evangelical congregations of the Basel Mission in India and West Africa was applied on the Gold Coast. By it polygyny was forbidden in the Church. On the other hand, the Mission recognised monogamous marriage according to the local custom. Though they impressed upon the people the necessity of a service of blessing in the Church, many did not wish to commit themselves. Neither did they find marriage under the Ordinance attractive. There were two reasons: firstly, the divorce regulations of English Law presented a major drawback. Secondly, up to 1909, people in Akuapem or Akyem or Akwamu disliked the expenses involved, for they could only marry according to the Ordinance after giving notice in Christiansborg, Accra, and by attending the Secretariat in person three weeks later; thereafter the Minister could marry the couple in Church.

The Mission was insisting upon Church marriage and marriage under the Ordinance because there was felt to be no stability in the customary marriage. The steps for marriage were relatively complicated; but divorce was common and though it involved the families on both sides, it could be easily effected

on the grounds of barrenness, sterility, adultery, witchcraft and incompatibility. The most serious problem the Mission realised was that the children were immediately neglected by the father when the marriage broke down. Even among the Guan with their patrilineal system in Akuapem this did happen. It was however worse among the matrilineal Akan in Akyem and Akwamu. The children belong to the mother's abusua, matrikin and thus have no share in the property of the father at his decease. The Mission's efforts to establish a Christian view of marriage and family life were partly an attempt to change this situation and also an attempt to abolish duolocal residence of couples, whereby the wives spent the day in the house of their matrikin and the night with their husbands. It was felt that if the man had only one wife, he would be compelled to take her home immediately and permanently.

In 1909, the Twi District Synod at Aburi laid down plans which would lead to eventual abolition of the matrilineal system of social organisation (Schlatter, 1916: 173). There was partial success. Akyem Abuakwa State Council accepted the Christian Council's Report on the Customary Law of Inheritance by which the Christian husband obtained the right to make provision for his widow and children. At his death his property might be divided into three equal parts between the widow, the children and the husband's abusua matrilineage. Even among the patrilineal Guan in Akuapem this commended itself. For in certain cases, children could not inherit their father's property immediately after death until all the father's brothers had died. In the case of movable property such as guns, clothing and so on, there was no problem. The son could inherit his father's goods. But in the case of estates, such as cocoa farms and buildings, it might have to be clearly defined as to how the deceased acquired them. It was and still is customary to distinguish 'family' and 'self-acquired' property among the Akan and the Guan peoples.

Perhaps the only area of real success in the

Mission's attempt to change the traditional way of life was in the case of puberty rites for girls. This had been an important ceremony for girls in the family and where it was not carried out it had led to serious repercussions for the family as a whole. Akuapem tradition explains the origin of the name of Mampong in the hills by saying that a number of refugees from a settlement in the Shai hills also known as Mampong escaped into the Akuapem hills from the tribulations consequent upon breaking the 'Dipo' or puberty rites. As a result of Christian influence and school education, the puberty rite is almost extinct now, even among non-Christians in south-eastern Ghana. Brokensha (1960: 9) observed that among the Guan people of Larteh, when a girl first menstruates she may be given a meal of eggs to signify the event, but nothing more is done. Among the Christian girls some observers believe that the place of the puberty rites is taken by confirmation. For instance J.H. Nketia writes about confirmation among the Akan:

"There is no drumming and dancing but feasting and the wearing of fine clothes They receive presents and go about thanking the members of the community as puberty girls would do. Many of our young girls and their parents now think that confirmation is the gateway to marriage for confirmation if anything, is to the African a kind of transition rite in which relatives are interested" (1956:32).

In assessing the influence of the Basel Mission upon aspects of marriage and family life among the south-eastern Akan one would say that though obvious changes did take place, for instance in residence patterns, in the establishment of a new body of customary church law concerning inheritance and also the modes of contracting marriages, yet basically many of the customary attitudes regarding marriage and family life remained unbroken.

Thus the Akan concept of marriage as an economic and procreative contract rather than as a spiritual

union of man and wife remained unchanged. The penchant for polygyny is clearly seen in the behaviour of Christians who become rich late in life and those who become chiefs. The case of Nana Sir Ofori Atta, prominent both as a Christian and as an Omanhene of Akyem Abuakwa and that of Frederick Kwasi Akuffo of Akuapem may be cited. Thus it is related of Kwasi Akuffo that he was the first Akuapem chief - if not the first in the Gold Coast - to have baptism and a higher education at the Basel Mission Theological Seminary, Akropong. However, despite his Christian education he had sixty-two recognised wives, one hundred and twentyseven children, one hundred and forty-two grandchildren and fifty-four great grandchildren during his lifetime. When a man can afford he still often continues to take many wives. If people are now tending towards monogamous marriage it may be that this is associated with factors of economic development rather than changes in sentiments.

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